

# UI board should be elected, senator says

By [Kate Clements](#)

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SPRINGFIELD -- State Sen. Bill Brady, R-Bloomington, filed legislation on Friday to revert to electing University of Illinois trustees.

"I have had many people that have questioned the behavior of the board, and the fact that such an important body exists in the state of Illinois and is not representative of the people through the popular vote," he said.

The debate on electing versus appointing trustees has been going on for decades. The university's first board was appointed by the governor, and trustees continued to be appointed until the late 1880s. The alumni association then began calling for an elected board, and the House and Senate approved the change in 1887. The first trustees were elected the following year. By the mid-1990s, then-Gov. Jim Edgar argued that voters knew little about the board candidates, and successfully fought for a law reverting to appointed trustees. The last trustee elections were held in 1994.

A decade later, former state Sen. Rick Winkel, R-Urbana, said trustees "have become nothing more than a rubber stamp to the governor." He sponsored legislation to move the board back into an elected body, which passed the House on a vote of 62 to 53 in 2004, but fell three votes shy in the Senate.

Winkel's bill, like Brady's, was a response to a controversial decision, a unanimous vote in 2003 to raise tuition by 5 percent ? a decision that appeared to come directly from the governor's office. The administration had planned for an 8 percent increase, and board members had been prepared to approve it just a day earlier. That same year, State Rep. Bill Mitchell, R-Forsyth, introduced an elected trustee bill in response to the board's decision to offer benefits to same-sex domestic partners of university employees.

Current UI Trustee David Dorris said going back to an elected body is a knee-jerk reaction that could cause as many problems as it cures.

"We've tried both, and the grass is not always greener on the other side," he said. "Neither one removes politics from the process. ? There is one thing, I think the university and its alumni should have at least some voice in the selection process of trustees, and they have not for some time. That would be more important than whether they were elected or appointed."

The UI itself has stayed neutral on trustee selection bills in recent year, and spokesman Tom Hardy said he expected that to be the case with Brady's legislation, a proposed amendment to SB1723.

"The UI has had both elected and appointed trustees over its 140 years of existence," Hardy added.

"The current system of appointed trustees has produced in the last dozen years, under three different governors, a series of trustees who have served the institution well and acted in the best interests of the university and the state."

UI Board Chairman Larry Eppley did not return a call seeking comment on Friday. But he told The News-Gazette in September 2003 that he did not think a different selection process would change the way trustees approached their duties.

"My guess is if you ask any of the board members, they'd say, whether elected or appointed, they view their role to be accountable custodians of the university on behalf of the citizens of the state," he said.